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House of Representatives

PROTECTING THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN VETERANS!

HON. BOB FILNER

OF CALIFORNIA
IN THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. Speaker, the bill before us, H.R. 5953, is an important piece of legislation, establishing a bill of rights for women veterans.

This has been the subject of over a year of discussion in our committee and around the country with various groups and stakeholders, to try and refine the legislation to one that everyone can support.

Let me just speak on the first half, and that is women veterans. There are almost 2 million women veterans now, Mr. Speaker, and they are one of the fastest growing subgroups of veterans in our Nation. It is estimated that the number of female veterans who use the VA health care system will double, assuming that the current enrollment rates remain constant.

The VA health care system, as we know it, was built to accommodate the war-related illnesses and injuries of male veterans. It's a male institution as it was created. In fact, many of the VA providers, many of the VA male veteran customers have little or no exposure to women veterans. As women are serving in combat conditions alongside their male counterparts, it is important that the Department embrace and recognize the needs of all veterans, both men and women alike.

Through hearings and roundtable discussions that we have held during this year, women veterans have come forward to share their personal stories. From their accounts, it is clear

that while the VA has made some strides in caring for women veterans, significant gaps remain. The woman veterans testifying before the committee have shared stories of feeling unwelcomed, alienated, disrespected in some of our VA medical centers so that they are now reluctant to pursue the benefits and services that they have earned with service to their country.

We have heard about women veterans walking into the lobby of a medical center and having catcalls come from all corners of that lobby. We have heard that when a woman who had her arm amputated from battle in Fallujah appeared before a doctor at her VA, the doctor thought she had cancer. He couldn't imagine her as having lost an arm due to combat conditions. We have had single women who have had to bring their children because they could not get child care, and doctors refusing to see them. We have got to change this institution to meet the needs, the real needs of the women veterans of our Nation.

The VA must recognize and be equipped to treat the unique medical concerns that women veterans have. They must respect privacy concerns and eliminate cultural insensitivity that may otherwise bar women from accessing the VA health care system. In most of the VA medical centers, they are not even changing behind privacy curtains so that women may have that deserved privacy.

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We made a lot of progress this Congress in addressing the women veterans with the enactment of S. 1963, the Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010. This bill, H.R. 5953, would bring the VA another step closer to providing equal care for women to that of their male counterparts.

My bill would require the VA to display in all of its facilities the 24 fundamental principles governing the treatment of women veterans, as well as to require VA to widely distribute the bill of rights to women veterans.

Among the key principles of this bill of rights is the right to coordinated, comprehensive primary women's health care at every VA medical center, the right to receive care from clinicians who have special training and experience in women's health issues, and gender equity in accessing all clinical services. My hope is that this legislation will lead to bold changes that will effectively tackle the needs of our brave and honored women veterans.

This bill, as amended, mandates also another bill of rights. Let me just say one last thing, though, on the women's bill of rights. There was some concern raised in recent days about the relationship to this bill and the rights conferred on women veterans, and therefore the bringing of abortion services into the VA medical facilities. This bill did not do that. It made no reference to all the laws on the books that prevent Federal facilities

from doing that. But in a discussion with the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH), who previously chaired this VA Committee, who is a leader of the so-called pro-life forces in this Congress, he said we can fix that for you. All you have to do is add a line that he gave us, and we have put in this bill.

So nobody need be concerned that this bill somehow overrides all previous laws and mandates abortion services in the VA clinics. It says and is included in this bill by manager's amendment that nothing in this act shall be construed to establish a right to any service excluded under 38 Code of Federal Regulations 17.38, as in effect on the date of the enactment of this act, 2010.

Those are the regulations that ban abortions in Federal facilities. So just to make sure that people feel that they can vote for this bill without violating some other principles, this sentence is in there, and the gentleman from New Jersey feels that that adequately and definitively eliminates that problem that had been brought up in recent days.

I urge my colleagues to support this important legislation. We have been working on this bill for a long, long time, and I am pleased that we have been allowed to bring this bill in this lame duck session to allow the VA to move into the 21st century in terms of treatment of our women veterans.